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The changing nature of urban history

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Settlements, of course, are unique: put Leicester or Edinburgh in the Satnav and your route is charted to a specific location. Although the course of a river and the natural contours of the terrain contribute to the urban and social morphology of place, the uniqueness of place is not a sufficient explanation of the character of a town or city. The higher, drier and often rockier land on which the major ecclesiastical, judicial and court structures were built, provides the particularities of place that distinguish a town; these elements are also insufficient to define its character.

What is distinctive about an 'urban' place has to do with the interaction of different factors, in different concentrations and in differing temporal and spatial contexts. If this was not the case then cities would be homogenised; mass produced save for their unique physical features. Leicester would be indistinguishable from Lancaster, and Birmingham in the UK from Birmingham, Alabama. Even where the ideology has been conducive and the physical setting similar (as in the Soviet era) then standardised plans on a geometric basis with functionalist architecture and common materials could not eliminate hierarchies of social status, housing, and patterns of consumption. Each place has its distinctive urban DNA determined by the mediation achieved by the locally variable mix of power, space, markets and cultural practices.

In medieval Europe, when the concept of the nation state was ill-defined, Italian and Baltic city states were heavily reliant on external trading relations; yet the nature of urban settlement was essentially self-contained and self-determined. Elsewhere, transport costs insulated many European settlements rendering them, in effect, independent states even though they formed part of larger political confederations. Royal charters and trading privileges conveyed a distinctive urban status to specific jurisdictions within essentially agrarian communities. Not surprisingly, chroniclers, antiquarians and historians of these urban settlements focused on a town or city as the principal unit of their descriptive accounts because a particular place was defined and manageable as a unit of study and possessed a distinctive identity. It was also the basis of change, drama, conflict and thus of modernity. Town rivalry and local loyalty further legitimated the study of a specific place; the quest for an identity, both individual and civic, concentrated attention on a town or city, as though it was the centre of the universe - which it was for local inhabitants.

Towns and cities, therefore, were not the benign receptacle of urban change. Often they were its initiator. More precisely, to use a scientific metaphor, 'Towns are like electrical transformers. They increase tension, accelerate the rhythm of exchange and ceaselessly stir up men's lives.' (1) Towns were 'agents of modernization' (2) and disproportionately expanded markets within their immediate orbit. (3) In southern Europe, particularly, but also with references to the territories bordering the North Sea, one reason for the seismic impact of Fernand Braudel's work was that it rendered formerly disparate accounts of rural communities and adjacent towns into a coherent economic and social system.

Towns formed their own networks within a greater system. For example, on the northern periphery of Europe, the convention of royal burghs in Scotland developed in the mid-16th century to enable them to promote common policies; it met more frequently than

parliament and lobbied it on the basis of an agreed urban agenda. (4)

For the modern period, Eric Monkkonen offered penetrating insights into the urban processes that have absorbed the energies of historians. Monkkonen claimed that through their legal status and administrative powers, cities possessed a corporate status which enabled them to 'borrow and lend, build and destroy, expand and contract, appear and disappear.' (5) From this perspective, urbanisation is the history of how cities 'came to their corporate status, what they have done with this status, and how they have shaped themselves', The critical factor was not the spatial entity of the city, but the 'shape' of the organisational unit; the most significant shift was from a 'regulatory' to an 'active' city, or from a relatively simple organisational form with limited scope using powers on a reactive basis, to an organisationally complex, pro-active city. The town council itself became an important player in the form and function of the city. (6)

Cities as corporate entities is an appealing perspective. The mutating nature of the urban power base is offered as an explanation of the changing shapes in society and on the ground. This was the underlying theme of a path-breaking publication, *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, edited by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff. (7) Urban social structures and the character of the built environment, therefore, take the forms they do because the governing elite, experts and the executive branch each vie for influence, reinterpreting their roles and embracing new civic opportunities. Yet the power base itself is dependent upon wealth, landholding, merchandising and inherited status; often urban development takes place outside the council chamber, in murky private deals based on the leverage of one interest group over another. In America, especially, the city council was dependent upon the role left to it by an economic system which only partially recognises mutuality and collectivity.

In certain respects this approach, based on the mutating character of urban governance, is itself an echo of the past. The quest for urban systems and typologies based on: scale (capital cities, metropolitan cities, megalopolis, administrative units), function (ports, railway centres, textiles, shipbuilding and heavy engineering, iron and steel, spas and tourist centres), categories (industrial cities, new towns, Mediterranean cities, imperial cities, sun belt/rust belt cities), ideology (capitalism, communism, utopian planning) and power and social relations (using thematic studies based on transport, demography, income and occupational patterns); were each attempts to move decisively away from studies of particular places. (8) In short, scholars were impatient with extending lists of events, officials and institutions, with cataloguing the minutiae of place and with the specifics of town and city. For example, while it was important to know what the nature and impact of Viking settlement was on York, or that of the Romans on Leicester, it was considered more important to locate this within systems of power, social customs and behaviour. The study of the street alignment in Rennes was valid in itself, for example, but how did this inform an understanding of regulatory frameworks in the French urban system? (9)

In other words, a new generation of historians was willing to generalise, to move away from the particular and to discount the occasional contrary piece of evidence. Studies of individual towns, which had characterised urban historical writing from antiquity, were too parochial in their scope. The agenda was to discover not what all the pieces of the jig-saw were, but to gain an impression of the overall picture to which they contributed and

the processes that had produced it. The loss of a few brush strokes did not blur the essence of the picture as a whole. Much, therefore, relied on typicality, on an understanding of statistics and a willingness to generalise on the basis of confidence limits associated with probabilities. This in turn placed social science disciplines at the heart of early urban historical writing, particularly in Britain in the 1960s. It was a development which coincided not only with a surge of newly created social science departments in universities, but also with the availability of mainframe computing power to analyse data, and funding from a government research body (Social Science Research Council) which encouraged data rich projects. Ideologically, a faith in social and behavioural analysis as a basis for macro level policy and planning, together with the relatively recent post-war reconstruction of cities, provided a bridge between the historical and the contemporary. It was part of a belief in the 1960s that social scientific analysis was a means to an end, the end being a fairer policy and a better, more equitable world.

The 'Dyos phenomenon' [\(10\)](#) crystallised a British interest in historically based town and city studies and this was coupled with developments in subject areas associated with historical geography and particularly in economic and social history. [\(11\)](#) This was a watershed in urban historical writing. A British strand of historical scholarship was based heavily on social science methods - on theorising, empiricism, and the refining of hypotheses. This was the context for the view advanced in 1975 by Dyos that 'the day of the individually posed, idiosyncratic study of a town that has no particular analytical purpose or significance is probably on the wane despite a certain efflorescence'. [\(12\)](#) These studies might fill in the missing pieces of an 'histoire totale', but Dyos questioned whether they contributed to a greater understanding of urban processes. Intuitively and intellectually, urban historians as social science historians were wary of the individual case, and thus of antiquarianism and localism. If the urban history agenda was to investigate general processes or laws, then the focus necessarily had to be wider than the individual event or town. Structuralism was dominant.

Within this urban history agenda, medievalists and early modernists in Britain were uncomfortable with theory and empiricism that often depended upon evidence of a kind which simply did not survive from earlier periods. Their concerns were various: the medieval and early modern town was a very different phenomenon to that of the 19th or 20th century. There was even considerable debate as to what constituted urban status in a period when few towns, in Britain at least, exceeded 10,000 people and many were far smaller. Towns in this period were certainly important agents of change, but the great cities aside, they cannot be understood to have exercised the kind of influence or autonomous agency possible in later periods. All towns must be understood in relation to their hinterlands, but in an essentially agrarian economy, medieval and early modern towns need to be studied as part of much broader systems and processes in which a distinctive urban experience is less easily isolated and defined. Quantification, which was axiomatic for so many of the questions posed by historians of the modern city was problematical: even establishing basic population figures for urban settlements has been a challenge. The value systems of medievalists and early modernists also sat uncomfortably with those analysed by urban historians of the modern period. Questions of legal status, systems of authority or the organising role of religion have loomed large. Concepts of class, by contrast, were far less important. Rather than urban growth, it was decline and decay that frequently attracted historians' attention. At times, it seemed that there was little in common between the towns of medieval Europe, which numbered a few thousand or

less, and the great cities of the 19th and 20th centuries. This led Peter Burke to pose the question: 'Does the nineteenth century mark the great divide in urban history?' (13)

This temporal divide hardened, with social scientists dominating urban historical writing in the period after 1750, and historians colonising the earlier period (a divide either side of the main thrust of industrialisation in Britain). (14) This in itself is a social science based generalisation, but the emergence of a separate Pre-Modern Towns group in 1987 was an expression of this intellectual and philosophical divide in Britain. It also made explicit the disciplinary distinction between colonies of social scientists and of historians in their respective approaches to towns and cities. More recent developments in historical writing have encouraged something of a rapprochement between historians across this chronological divide. Since the 1980s, the rise of cultural history, linguistics, postmodernism, and the influence of the Annales School (as reflected in interest in the construction of historical *mentalités*, for example) cast doubt on the empiricism and the theoretical assumptions of the social science based approaches. Quantitative methods, which were implicit in much early social science based urban history, could be criticised for having reified towns as depersonalised, abstract entities which simply grow or decline, experience problems or resolve them. Such an approach distorted the nature of historical inquiry by focusing on issues and questions for which quantifiable sources exist, and by marginalising aspects of urban life which did not lend themselves so easily to quantification, such as women's work. Urban history, as Griffiths and Jenner observed, was rendered as 'a series of graphs and tables, or a succession of maps'. (15) More recently, however, personal computing and the digitisation of historical sources have altered the balance of historical enquiry yet again. The 'linguistic turn', and the school of cultural history which grew from it, directed historians towards the analysis of language and the way in which it shaped perceptions of identity and experience, particularly in terms of social status, class and gender. This approach has lent itself well to sources from the middle ages to the 20th century. The concentration of people within towns and cities and the rich potential for different forms of communication in urban society multiplied the opportunities to establish and create meaning, or express identity. Prostitution, violent crime and class relationships in 19th-century London could now be analysed in terms of competing representations of sexual danger. (16) The emphasis on 'experience and identity' as categories of analysis has opened up new avenues for urban historians to explore which were previously ignored or regarded as incidental: for example, the sensory experience of the city, its sight, smell, touch and sound, has provided the subject of recent books and articles. (17) Since the translation into English of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* in 1991, historians, and urban historians in particular, have sought to 'spatialise' understandings of identity, social relations and human activity. The urban environment and the material fabric of streets, houses and public buildings can no longer be seen as passive actors in the historical process; rather, urban space was both moulded by and moulded the behaviour and actions of urban inhabitants. (18) Questions of identity and social experience, meaning and representation equally transcend the chronological boundaries.

Different traditions of urban history emerged in other European countries and in America, conditioned by the development of various disciplines which participated in writing on towns and cities and on the institutional structures in which they were located. (19) In this respect, locating work based on town and cities was sufficient to qualify as 'urban history'; however, as explained earlier, this was in Britain a necessary though not a

sufficient condition because of the social science background to the subject area, and because the urban dimension was itself considered an independent actor in the process of change and development in towns and cities. As Dyos explained:

the authentic measure of urban history is the degree to which it is concerned directly and generically with cities themselves and not with the historical events and tendencies that have been purely incidental to them ... it is the study of the characteristically symbiotic relationships of their [cities'] different characteristics, of the ways in which their components fitted together or impinged on other things that distinguishes urban historians from those who may be said merely to be passing through their territory. (20)

Did the legitimacy of the study of towns and cities go into decline after 1914? Anthony Sutcliffe claimed that 'as the state took over the city, the city disappeared' and that as national codes governing social policy and most facets of daily life were increasingly decided in the national parliament, the autonomy of the city was undermined. (21) It is a view which presumes that the town or city can only have a role by virtue of its independence from the national state. Of course, the independence to collect taxes, administer justice, frame regulations, and to decide the qualifications for admission to inner councils and decision-making bodies, does convey autonomy; however, the town is not simply the receptacle of national developments in social, economic and political activity. It is, as many authors have noted, the locus of the interaction of these forces, and their interplay produces specific outcomes. Irrespective of national guidelines, implementation may take unexpected forms that are sometimes unacceptable to national policy-makers.

Urban resistance, adaptation and independence, therefore, did not disappear with the nation state; they were simply further adaptations of endemic local-central tensions which has been an enduring theme in studies of towns and cities in every age. (22) The Poll Tax protests in Britain in 1990, which were acts of civil disobedience opposed to the policies of a ruling caste in Westminster, and contemporary European regionalism, both have significant urban dimensions. For example, campaigns for political autonomy in Edinburgh, Barcelona and Milan, reflect urban and regional interests which do not mirror national interests. Nowhere is the view that the city retains its independent status more evident than in the intersection between the physical fabric and the social fabric. Space and buildings are increasingly recognised as non-neutral. (23) They shape lives, behaviour, perceptions and ultimately policy. Cities as kaleidoscopic and compressed memories, with their buildings and open spaces, colours and textures, summarise the lived experience of the citizens while also projecting meanings and symbolise values. As instruments of power and control, these are dimensions of the urban which have little if anything to do with national policy, and are largely independent of central government.

The central themes of urban history over the last 40 years can be illustrated by considering how the study of the built environment has been handled, though this could also be done through other lenses. Perhaps predictably, early interest centred on the production of the physical character of the city: the slums and suburbs, builders and capitalists. Interest then produced research on class, social relations and organisations, with studies of urban management and public administration closely associated with living conditions and political movements. These were necessary early steps, but an understanding of urban space put a premium on appreciating landownership, mercantile

activities, the power base of previous settlements, and value and cultural systems which fundamentally shaped the physical appearance of towns and cities. In short the 'cultural turn' highlighted what Graeme Davison and Sam Bass Warner described as multiple urban images. (24) Individual buildings or concentrations of buildings produce widely divergent responses according to individual tastes, wealth, status and other analytical categories. Town halls and public buildings were no longer of much interest as physical objects; instead becoming significant for what they represented and as a stage set for public demonstrations and civic ceremonies. Slums were real, but they also entered the imagination through the power of the media. (25) Manhattan's first skyscrapers presented highly divergent images to users (managers, maintenance workers, visitors, commuters, owners and designers); and reactions depended upon where in the intersection between different modes of production and consumption an individual was located. The symbolism of the buildings - threatening, phallic, convenient, and inspirational - evoked a range of descriptions to convey different meanings and 'mental markers' associated with multi-storey construction. (26) The built environment emerged from urban historical analysis as more balanced; the influence of the Annales approach was evident, if implicit.

Since the Urban History Group was founded over 40 years ago, the study of towns and cities has itself mutated as intellectual fashions and policies in the universities have ebbed and flowed. In the first decade of its existence, the networks of scholars working on the historical development of towns and cities included many social historians, who at that time, had no formal organisational structure or journal. However, this changed from the late 1970s for several reasons: first, the wave of social scientific positivism receded; second, the clusters of urban historians previously located in economic history departments lost their focus; and third, 'New Universities' flourished in the emerging glow of cultural history. Finally, the study of towns and cities became embedded in almost all social history courses, which were reintegrated into the mainstream History curriculum as the structures of Universities changed, both in response to funding imperatives and to the administrative 'reforms' associated with the Research Assessment Exercise.

If the distinctiveness of urban history as a discipline is no longer so clearly demarcated, then it is due to changes in the nature of historical discipline itself, rather than to any crisis of confidence in the validity of the town or city as the object of historical research. The 'cultural' turn, as noted above, has helped to dissolve the boundaries between many different sub-genres of history, not just urban history. The cogency of urban history as a framework for historical inquiry, however, remains powerful and it continues to evolve in new directions. As South Asia, China and parts of Africa undergo unprecedented urbanisation, the study of urban history is losing its Eurocentric focus and is instead taking on an increasingly global perspective. 'World cities' such as Bombay, Delhi, Shanghai and Singapore, as well as London and Los Angeles are the crucial nodal points of global networks and key players in the emergent field of transnational history, which looks at interactions and developments beyond the nation state and across continental boundaries. As the temperature of the global village rises, a historically informed understanding of the interaction between cities and the environment has become increasingly pressing. (27)

In 1801, one person in four in Britain lived in a town or city; by 1901 almost four out of every five did so. Much of our early modern and modern history is an account of that transition from country to town, and of the processes by which townspeople obtained a living, and managed their social, cultural and political organisations. In Britain, there was

an early realisation that the study of life in towns and cities provided an important counter-balance to the former reliance on the political history of the state and its overseas excursions. In our contemporary world, towns and cities are central to the pressing issues of environmental damage, energy efficiency, inequality and how to develop sustainable communities and functional family relationships. A sense of place is what unites us; a sense of the past is what we share. Our town or city provides a focus for our activities and how we relate to it is a means to combat the anonymity of modernity. In a world that is increasingly urban, particularly in Asia and Africa, understanding the process by which we manage the habitat, the town or city, that is now the experience of the majority of the world's population must be a central element in historical scholarship.

Notes:

1. F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* (London, 1973), p. 382. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. M. J. Daunton, 'Towns and economic growth in 18th-century England', in *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*, ed. P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (Cambridge, 1978), p. 276. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E. A. Wrigley, 'The town in a pre-industrial economy', in *Towns in Societies*, ed. P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley, p. 304. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Goodare, *The Government of Scotland 1500-1625* (Oxford, 2004), p. 51. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. E. Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns 1780-1980* (Berkeley, 1988). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. Garrard, *Heads of the Local State. Mayors, Provosts and Burgomasters since 1800* (Aldershot, 2007). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff (2 vols, London 1973). It was H. J. Dyos who was largely responsible for energising the field of urban history in Britain through a Newsletter, colloquia such as *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), the formation of the Urban history Group annual conference, and his own publications and networking. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. S. G. Checkland, 'An urban history horoscope', in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (London 1983), p. 464. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. B. Lepetit, *The Pre-industrial Urban System: France 1740-1840* (Cambridge 1994), p. 113. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. D. N. Cannadine, 'The "Dyos phenomenon" and after', *Exploring the Urban Past. Essays in Urban History by H. J. Dyos* in ed. D. N. Cannadine and D. Reeder (Cambridge 1982), p. 208. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. R. J. Morris and R. Rodger, 'An introduction to British urban history' in *The Victorian City 1820-1914: A Reader*, ed. Morris and Rodger (Harlow 1993), pp. 1-43. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. H. J. Dyos, 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook* (1975), p. 3. [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. P. Burke, 'Some reflections on the pre-industrial city', *Urban History Yearbook*, (1976), p. 16. [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. See for example the selections and bibliographies in the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*,. (3 vols, Cambridge 2000) and in the Longman series *Readers in Urban History*; for example, *The Medieval Town 1200-1540*, ed. R. Holt and G. Rosser; *The Tudor and Stuart Town 1530-1688*, ed. J. Barry; *The 18th-Century Town 1688-1820*, ed. P. Borsay (all Harlow, 1990); and *The Victorian City 1820-1914*, ed. R. J. Morris and R. Rodger (Harlow, 1993). [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. P. Griffiths and M. Jenner, 'Introduction' in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Griffiths and Jenner (Manchester, 2000), 7. [Back to \(15\)](#)
16. J. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian*

London (London, 1992). [Back to \(16\)](#)

17. See, for example, E. Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Stench and Noise in England 1600-1770* (New Haven and London 2007); *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500*, ed. A. Cowan and J. Steward (Aldershot, 2006); D. Garrioch, 'Sounds of the city. The soundscape of European towns, 17th to 19th century', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 5-25, and the articles in *Urban History*, 29 (2002), a special issue devoted to music and urban history. [Back to \(17\)](#)
18. For an analysis of the interaction between space, social identity and power relations in the 18th century, see M. Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity. London's Geographies 1680-1780* (Guildford, 1998). [Back to \(18\)](#)
19. H. S. J. Jansen, 'Wrestling with the angel: problems of definition in urban historiography', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 277-99. See also *Teaching Urban History in Europe/l'Enseignement de l'Histoire Urbaine en Europe*, ed. D. Menjot and R. Rodger (Leicester, 2006); *European Urban History: Prospect and Retrospect*, ed. R. Rodger (Leicester, 1993). [Back to \(19\)](#)
20. H. J. Dyos, 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1974, p. 5. [Back to \(20\)](#)
21. A. Sutcliffe, 'In search of the urban variable', in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. Fraser and Sutcliffe, p. 263. [Back to \(21\)](#)
22. On the enduring importance of local factors in a national policy framework see, for example, D. Reeder and R. Rodger, 'Industrialisation and the city economy', in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. Daunton, pp. 553-92. [Back to \(22\)](#)
23. See for example, D. Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Camb. Mass, 1995); K. Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981); H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), trans. from *Le Production d'Espace* (Paris 1974); R. Lawrence, 'Integrating architectural, social and housing history', *Urban History*, 19 (1992), 39-63; T. A. Markus, *Building and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* (London, 1993); S. Zukin, *Landscapes of Power* (Los Angeles, 1991). [Back to \(23\)](#)
24. S. B. Warner, 'The management of multiple urban images' in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. Fraser and Sutcliffe, pp. 383-94. [Back to \(24\)](#)
25. A. Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representations in Three Cities 1870-1914* (Leicester, 1993), see especially, part 2. [Back to \(25\)](#)
26. M. Domosh, 'The symbolism of the skyscraper: case studies of New York's first tall buildings', *Journal of Urban History*, 14 (1988), 320-45; S. B. Warner, 'The management of multiple urban images', 391-3. [Back to \(26\)](#)
27. For an insight into the diverse range of topics, including transnational and environmental history, currently being explored by urban historians, see the list of sessions and panels at the forthcoming conference of the European Association of Urban Historians [accessed 22 February 2008]. [Back to \(27\)](#)